

Colossians 1:13-14

“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption the forgiveness of sins.”

Though the 18th century French writer Voltaire (1694-1778) died a decade before the start of the French Revolution

- He profoundly influenced many of its leaders through his dramas, poems and stories
- Famous for his witty, scepticism, Voltaire wrote:
- ‘When my works have gone around the world the Bible will be a forgotten book’
- Some years later, Voltaire’s house in Paris, where he wrote those words
- became a distributing centre for the British and Foreign Bible Society
- and while few know much about Voltaire, most of us know something from the Bible

The Bible is undoubtedly an extraordinary book and yet in its component parts

- one is forced to conclude that it does not always look that promising, take the letter to the Colossians
- this rather small New Testament book runs to just 2,032 words in English
- (I know because I counted – happily with the help of the computer)
- it was written the better part of 2,000 years ago (probably in about 60 AD)
- by a man who was imprisoned because of a religious dispute
- to Colossae, which was situated in the mountains of what today is modern Turkey
- By New Testament times it was a rather insignificant market town and today the area is uninhabited

Familiarity, will often cause us to skip over the opening verses of such New Testament letters

- but we miss something important if we do so
- ‘Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God’

This is the kind of statement that we pass over in our enthusiasm to get to the action

- but we should not miss the dramatic claims that Paul is making
- an apostle of Christ Jesus means more than just a religious leader
- it is the dramatic claim that Paul is speaking as an ambassador and, if he is right,
- there is every reason to believe that this ancient letter can also be God's word to his people today
- And that, in itself, is such a dramatic claim that we had better see if it rings true

This introductory section (broadly speaking Chapter 1:1-14) sketches the current situation at the Colossian church

- Paul is thankful for the members and for their faith, love and hope, these are the hallmarks of a Christian
- Paul also makes reference to Epaphras, who seems to have been a preacher-teacher
- Who had proclaimed the truth of the good news in Jesus, which the apostle calls 'the word of truth'

It is his prayer that God will fill them with the knowledge of his will, through all spiritual wisdom and understanding

- and that they be strengthened with all power, by which he appears to mean not a new knowledge
- but a proper and intelligent use of what they know already, and that they should go on in Christian discipleship
- because of all that God in Christ has done for them

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption the forgiveness of sins.

It is this phrase that is clearly the climax of this opening section and to which we must turn our attention now

- the key words appear to be 'rescued' and 'redemption'
- but both of these words imply that there is a previous state, a state that I simply call 'ruined'

I RUINED

To be fair, the word ‘ruined’ does not appear in this Bible passage, I use it as a label for ‘dominion of darkness’

- the word translated ‘dominion’ is ‘power’ in the sense of ‘authority’ but what does ‘darkness’ mean?
- The correct way to interpret darkness is not normally to reach for the OED but to see how the Bible uses it
- And the best way to do that is not simply to look at the English text but to look at the original Greek
- This does not require any knowledge of Greek at all, just a simple tool called an analytical concordance
- Now the answer is that the same word (translated here ‘darkness’) is used in the NT on 30 other occasions
- and my guess is that you do not want to hear all 30 cross-references, but let’s consider a handful of them
- “the people living in darkness have seen a great light (Matthew 4:16)
- Here Jesus is using familiar words from a passage in Isaiah – ‘darkness’ here means captivity or judgment
- Jesus often uses ‘darkness’ to describe the destiny of those outside the kingdom (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30)
- In his testimony before King Agrippa Paul describes the commission that he was given by God

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

(Acts 26:17-18)

The dominion of darkness is where evil powers hold sway and have authority, which can be expressed in terms

- of the dominion of the Devil or in terms of disobedience, rebellion, ignorance, hatred, shame, captivity
- it matters little if the people caught in this dominion are helpless captives or willing slaves
- what really matters is whether this describes the situation that people are in today

This is where the church so often gets the answer hopelessly wrong – I was brought up to believe

- that people in church were really happy and people outside (at the pub or wherever) were really sad
- But the older I became the more I realised that this was not true (sometimes the exact opposite was true)
- In any event, while some people I met in church were very saintly, and some outside were wicked
- The majority of the people inside and outside of the church seemed much the same
- In fact, the people outside of the church often seemed to be happier and having much more fun
- But this is the flawed logic of religion and the simplest way I know of explaining is a rather sentimental story

A little girl affectionately saw her Daddy off to work in the morning after which she ran to Mummy shouting

- ‘Mummy, I’ve got sixpence!’ Mummy says to her, ‘Show me.’
- But the little girl replies, ‘I can’t show you but Daddy has promised it to me.’
- Now living as if you have it because it is promised by one who is faithful is the ‘now and not yet’ of hope
- It’s what the theologian calls ‘realised eschatology’

Now the pious preacher suggests that men on Saturday night having a few too many drinks

- or women out ‘on the pull’ and maybe succeeding are not really happy, even though they think they are
- whereas I suggest that they are having a whale of a time and if all we have to offer is religion it’s not much
- meanwhile, nearly every reference to joy in the NT is in the context of Christians suffering or being persecuted
- how do we square that? It seems to me that the solution is a matter of what promises you are trusting in
- we know that for a short time we can have some fun far from home (like the Prodigal Son in the parable)
- I have no doubt that he had a great time but on other hand these things were passing and temporary
- we meet religion in the shape of the elder brother (what a self-righteous, party-pooper he turns out to be)
- in the dominion of darkness, the only end is the promise of death, but in the Father, we meet ‘grace’

II RESCUED

In the Greek New Testament the word rendered ‘rescued’ in our translation

- carries with it the notion of ‘snatched’, repatriated, transferred, carried away
- It’s as if it is an assertive, decisive and urgent action

I don’t know how historically factual it is but it is said that when the Titanic was sinking in 1912

- The band played on and that the passengers sang ‘Abide with me’ on the decks of the doomed ship
- Just 28 years later, in June 1940, 5,000 souls perished when the RMS Lancastria was sunk by enemy action
- As an act of defiance to the enemy they heroically sang, ‘Roll out the barrel’ - but that’s no song for us
- For even the unbeliever recognises that worldly pleasures are inevitably temporary
- But the believer is rescued from the dominion of darkness to the light, Paul does not give us details here
- But (2 Cor. 4:6) he says God gave us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ

The apostle Paul renders his conversion as being rescued from darkness to light (Acts 26:18)

- in the gospel the love of the Father for the Son becomes the pledge of his love for all
- it is in the Son that we have redemption the forgiveness of sins
- but God does not stop with deliverance from the authority of darkness
- he has also *brought* (moved from one country to another) his people into the kingdom
- this is not a geographical area but the sovereign rule of Christ, the Son he loves
- The picture changes quickly, not now the victor who rescues the captive
- but the generous benefactor who pays the price to redeem a slave

III REDEEMED

‘Redemption’ is not much used on a weekday; I call it a Sunday word, but redemption requires a price to be paid

- At the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp on Holy Saturday 1945 Latvian-born Roman Catholic nun
- Maria Skobtsova took the place of a Jewish woman who was going to be sent to the gas chamber
- how the woman felt about that nun we cannot say
- but we know of an even greater act of love by which the Son of God has set us free
- for at the heart of the biblical message is the account of the Son of God dying on the cross
- not for what he had done, but because of who he was, and the mission he undertook

Elsewhere (Eph. 1:7) Paul points out that the price Jesus paid for our redemption was his own blood

- some people suggest that this is a primitive understanding of the love of God
- but nothing could be further from the truth
- the simple question is, ‘how much does he love us?’ and before the cross we proclaim, ‘this much!’

A central feature of redemption is the forgiveness of sins, we do not live in the kingdom of God burdened with guilt

- because Jesus has dealt with sin and guilt for us upon his cross – and we live in praise and thanksgiving to him
- as believers we must live with dignity and dedication a life that befits such costly redemption
- but this is not ‘religion’ – an effort to show ourselves worthy of God’s forgiveness
- this is simply ‘thanksgiving’ – to the only one who could secure God’s forgiveness
- that is why Christian worship is essentially thanksgiving to Jesus, a ruined people, rescued and redeemed

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption the forgiveness of sins.